

Which screenwriting software is the best?

Final Draft vs. The Rest

I'm Oliver, a freelance screenwriter and copywriter with over eight years of experience in the film, television, commercials industry.

I started using Final Draft back in 2010 when I first began writing screenplays. Created in 1990 and marketed by the company as the #1 screenwriting software in the world it has since become the industry leader. But over the last few years, many screenwriters have turned their back on Final Draft for cheaper, more intuitive alternatives.

Why?

Let's take a look at the competition.

Features

Final Draft

- Simple and efficient to use, it employs a SmartType feature that adds the names of characters and locations to a drop-down menu for easy access.
- Includes 300+ templates for screenplays, teleplays, stage plays.
- Text-to-speech engine, meaning you can hear your dialogue read out loud.
- Alternate dialogue to create different versions of character lines.
- A beat board and story map to help outline and organise ideas for film projects.
- Allows for real-time collaboration.
- Time-saving keyboard shortcuts.

Movie Magic

- Has all the same features as Final Draft, except for the beat board and story map. The software replaces these with a NaviDoc interface that can display an outline, scenes, notes, and bookmarks alongside the script as it's being written.
- Only offers 100+ templates.
- It can import and reformat Microsoft Word, PDF, or Rich Text files.
- The interface is a bit outdated and it has no app for iPads and iPhone use.

Fade In

- Offers many of the same features as Final Draft and Movie Magic, such as automatic script formatting, auto-complete typing, templates, real-time collaboration, and cloud storage, all in an easy-to-use interface.
- A script breakdown tool.
- Index cards.
- Revision tracking.
- A Dialogue Tuner that helps keep a consistent character voice.
- An overused word checker.
- An action-to-dialogue calculator to help writers show rather than tell their stories.

Highland

- Intuitive screenplay writing tool that using plain text formatting, so when users type a character's name in all caps, the next line is automatically entered as dialogue. Highland also recognises scene headers like INT and EXT and transitions like CUT TO and automatically suggests character and location names.
- It can read .markdown, .txt, and .fountain files, a text-based file compatible with most screenwriting software.
- Highland files can also be opened and edited in any plain text editor like Google Docs and Notepad.
- Track the gender breakdown of speaking parts in a script.

Writer Duet

- Best for collaboration since it allows multiple users to work on a script at the same time with no danger of overwrites.
- Auto-syncs with mobile apps and an online-offline desktop app.
- Users can see each other's changes immediately, even if they're working on the same line at the same time.
- Offers intuitive commenting features and in-app text and video chat to streamline feedback and co-writing.
- Includes templates, outlining tools, reporting alternate dialogue storage, cloud backup (Dropbox, Google Drive, iCloud), and revision tracking.
- WriterDuet can import and export to most common formats, including Final Draft, Fountain, and PDF.

Celtx

- A cloud-based screenwriting platform focused on film pre-production and production.
- Best for production because it organises all of the project elements of a film in one centralised, collaborative tool.

- Includes many industry-standard features such as importing from PDF, Final Draft, and Microsoft Word documents; templates; revision tracking; and multi-user collaboration.
- The all-in-one solution for writing, planning, and collaborating on film, TV, play, and even video game projects makes it easy to create story and script boards, budgets, schedules, call sheets and more.
- Users can break down scripts to create lists of props, locations, and actors; block shots to mark camera, lighting, and cast positions.
- Can create reports to keep track of costs.

As you can see, there's a lot of overlap in terms of what's on offer features-wise. But while all the programs contain the basic requirements needed to write a screenplay, there are a few that stand out.

***Highland 2** may be a little basic for some, but its intuitive interface and novel features - such as the gender breakdown tool - give it a modern, contemporary edge when compared to what feels like the dated layout of **Movie Magic**.*

*Meanwhile, the niche offerings of **Writer Duet** and project management features of **Celtx** make them perfect for writing partnerships and production professionals, but less suited to the everyday professional screenwriter.*

*Which leaves us with **Final Draft** and **Fade In**. While the former boasts 200 more templates than the latter, this is of little value to professional screenwriters who only really need one. Meanwhile, the index cards, overused word checker, and action-to dialogue calculator included in **Fade In** are just a few of the useful features that make the development and editing process easier.*

Verdict: Fade In

Users

Final Draft

According to their website, Final Draft is used by 95% of film and television productions with testimonials from Aaron Sorkin (West Wing, Social Network), J.J. Abrams (Lost, Star Wars), and Sofia Coppola (Lost in Translation) to name but a few. It's hard to argue with its market share and the talent that uses it, but how much of this is down to its quality and how much is a resistance to change?

Movie Magic

Movie Magic peaked in the 20th century and has been on the wane ever since. Anecdotally, it seems to remain popular among older working professionals who value the consistency and reliability of the product, but younger users seem less enamoured by its old-fashioned interface.

Fade In

Fade In counts Rian Johnson (Knives Out, Looper), Craig Mazin (Chernobyl), and Kelly Marcel (Saving Mr. Banks, Venom) amongst its many users. If Final Draft were a PC, Fade in would be a Mac. It has that 'if you know, you know' cache and feels like the cooler, less commercial relative of Final Draft that lets its features do the talking.

Highland

Created by legendary screenwriter and co-host of cult screenwriting podcast Scriptnotes, John August. Highland has only been around for a few years but it's starting to carve out a customer base of professionals and screenwriting newbies thanks to its unique, yet easy-to-use interface. If it continues to build on its modern, stylish look with modern features that appeal to younger users then it could start to mount a serious challenge to its competitors.

Writer Duet

Writer Duet is built for writing partnerships which make up a small, but significant part of the screenwriting community. That said, with the growth of television and writers' rooms, screenwriting is becoming an increasingly collaborative medium and Writer Duet could be perfectly placed to capitalise on this opportunity.

Celtx

Like Writer Duet, Celtx targets a smaller, yet sizeable customer base made up of production staff. Amongst the professional screenwriting community, it remains something of an outsider, but its value for money makes it popular with newcomers who want to give screenwriting a go without making a significant investment.

***Writer Duet** and **Celtx** have niche customer bases, while young, plucky upstart **Highland** is battling out with older, less adaptable programs like **Movie Magic** which is struggling to stay relevant. And although **Fade In** has stolen some users from **Final Draft**, the latter continues to dominate.*

Verdict: Final Draft

Cost

One-off payment

Final Draft:	£145.04
Movie Magic:	£108.72
Fade In:	£79.95
Highland:	Free (Basic)/£50.75 (Pro)

Monthly payment

Writer Duet:	£7.24 (Plus)/£8.69 (Pro)/£10.14 (Premium)
Celtx:	£5.44

*As of writing, **Final Draft** costs a whopping £145.04 (converted from USD). That's 20% pricier than the next most expensive **Movie Magic**. These are both established brands with decades of experience in the movie business which they might argue justifies their price tags. But when judged against the features of relative newcomers **Fade In** and **Highland**, or cheaper monthly subscriptions with **Writer Duet** and **Celtx**, its hard to account for the lofty price tag.*

Verdict: Fade In

Conclusion

As someone who has used Final Draft for the last 10 years, I can honestly say that it's never let me down. That said, every time a new version is released (often without enough updates to justify it) I wince at the cost of what is essentially a supped-up word processor. Based on what I've learned and discussed here, I've decided that when my current version of **Final Draft** runs out I'll be investing in **Fade In**. And so should you.